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Compassion by Committee

Why did it take two years for the Reagan administration to discover that the famine in Ethiopia was a disaster that transcended its political hostility toward the Marxist regime in Addis Ababa?

Like many bad decisions made in Washington, this one was produced by committee.

In 1982, officials of the Agency for International Development became convinced, through reports from the field, that a dangerous situation was developing in Ethiopia and the Sudan. An inter-agency task force was set up to deal with the problem—with representatives from the State, Defense and Agriculture departments, together with AID, the CIA and the National Security Council.

By 1983, the committee was meeting at least once a month, and two things had become clear: (1) The situation in Ethiopia was deteriorating, and (2) the NSC man on the committee, Fred Wettering, was one of the main obstacles to swift and massive aid by the United States.

Sources who were present at task force meetings told my associate Lucette Lagnado that Wettering never seemed interested in appeals that the United States should send food to Ethiopia strictly on a humanitarian basis, with no thought of immediate political profit. The NSC man, the sources said, took the line that the Marxist regime in Addis Ababa should take care of its own mess, get help from its Soviet backers or make strategic concessions before it received U.S. aid. Only a few courageous officials expressed opposition.

The NSC representative repeatedly quoted from

intelligence reports that chronicled the Ethiopian government's indifference to the suffering of its starving people. Wettering pointed out that the Marxist regime hadn't even given its own hunger commission the money and vehicles it needed to carry out its assigned mission.

As one task force member recalled, "The NSC pointed to the failures of the Ethiopian government to support the relief effort . . . and to the fact that the Ethiopians were providing facilities to the Soviets."

None of the sources argued with the NSC man's facts, or with his presentation of the views of an agency whose middle name, after all, is "Security." They simply thought Wettering was being callous in a situation that cried out for humane action.

As it happened, the NSC's coldblooded calculations were wrong about driving a bargain with the Marxist regime. Addis Ababa was even more coldblooded and refused to make concessions to obtain U.S. aid.

Meanwhile, thousands—perhaps millions—are suffering because of this macho poker game between the NSC and the Ethiopian government. For almost two years the NSC argument carried the day, and the massive U.S. relief effort that could have saved countless lives never occurred.

The NSC finally folded its hand. "They backed down rather reluctantly when it became clear that our efforts to pressure Ethiopia were failing and that millions of people would die," a source said.

By then it was too late for many Ethiopians.

Footnote: Wettering, who now works at the CIA, declined to comment.